

Making meetings efficient and effective

A survey by 3M in 1998 of 2,800 meeting attendees suggested that 25 to 50 percent of the time people spend in meetings is wasted. In addition two-thirds of respondents classified a quarter to a half of meeting time as 'wasted' while about 15% of respondents rated their meetings as 'very unproductive'. Are things any different today?

This Lucid Thought was inspired by an article published in the Volume 23, No.1 of the International Journal of Project Management (IJPM) in January 2005. The article, based on research in Brazil and the USA on socially efficient meetings is well worth a read and it prompted us to reflect on the cost to projects of inefficient and ineffective meetings.

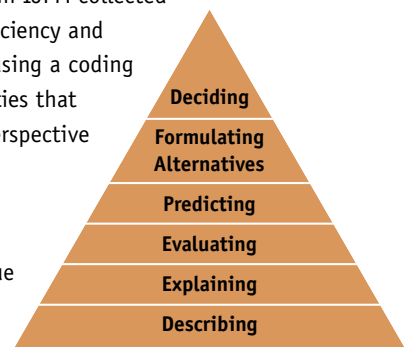
Meeting management is the sort of subject that most of us might be offended to hear is not one of our strengths, but the reality is that for many of us it really isn't. We spend a huge amount of our time in meetings - probably too much time. That wouldn't be too bad if the time we spent was always productive, either in terms of decision making about the task or team/relationship building with the attendees. Are we the only ones who go to too many meetings where the objectives and agenda are not clear, where there is confusion about roles and responsibilities, where time is spent on micro managing issues rather than deciding on strategy and where actions are not assigned and committed to and timely, accurate minutes made available? Our experience suggests that unfortunately we are not unique.

Meeting behaviour is one of those areas of corporate life that is deeply embedded in an organisation's culture. Some organisations from our experience take meeting management

very seriously and behaviours are structured, responsible and focused on efficient and effective use of people's time. Whether the practice (allegedly) of no chairs in meeting rooms and a digital readout clocking up the cost of the meeting in terms of chargeable time of the people attending is good or not - some organisations recognise the cost of meetings and attempt to manage it. Others are different; lots of people, lots of chat, lots of frustration and little progress. Most organisations are probably somewhere between these two extremes and lie on a continuum. It might be interesting for you to reflect on where you think your organisations lies.

The research published in IJPM collected data on the effectiveness, efficiency and hence the value of meetings using a coding system for the types of activities that occur in meetings from the perspective of the meeting manager.

The activities could be shown as a hierarchy, with value added increasing towards the top of the pyramid.



Hard data was collected to support the intuitive view that meeting value increased when the meeting was focused on those types of activity that it would be difficult to do using other communication methods, i.e. the higher order activities as shown on the pyramid.

So what does this mean in practical terms for project meetings? The suggestions below will require a substantial cultural change for

some organisations, but should pay off enormously.

- *Describe things OUTSIDE of the formal meeting. Send papers in advance. Require people to read them and double-check that they have and of course always read them yourself. Create a culture where only points of clarification on the issues are allowed (level 2 explaining activities).*
- *Make objectives and roles and responsibilities of participants clear. Use a Responsibility Assignment Matrix to show who is there to be responsible, who is there to be consulted, who is there to decide etc. Ensure that only the responsible party explains the point being discussed.*
- *Have clear leadership within the meeting. Use a skilled facilitator (from inside the group where possible) to manage the process of evaluating, predicting and formulating alternatives. Capture all ideas, build on creativity, acknowledge personal perspectives but evaluate issues logically.*
- *Make decisions in a way that can be understood, committed to by participants regardless of their starting point of view and explained/justified in future. Write things down and make the notes the official record.*
- *Follow up all decisions after the meeting to ensure that all agreed actions are taken and never allow yourself to attend the next meeting only to find out that nothing has changed.*

We all know that meetings are an important aspect of day-to-day working life and an ultra-important aspect of the management of projects. Therefore we cannot do without them so we need to ensure that our essential meetings are always efficient and effective. **Implementing the suggestions we have made may lead you towards a position where efficient, effective, valuable meetings are not elusive but the norm.**

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